MARTIN LITTON

Looking south *down long placid valley, you can see 10,587-foot-high Farewell Gap, one of major passes across mountains*

Horse-packing trips *climb from valley into surrounding mountains*

Campsite on the rocks: *rugged terrain near White Chief Lake is typical*

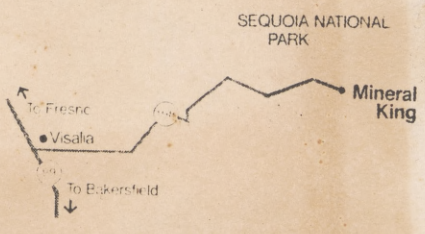
Still controversial, still difficult to get to (700 curves), and still undeveloped (only 55 campsites)

Magnificent Mineral King

Mineral King: glaciers plowed it, avalanches scoured it, miners burrowed its cliffs for silver, and loggers shaved its slopes for wood. Then came the lawyers. When, in 1965, the U.S. Forest Service and Walt Disney Productions came forth with plans to turn Mineral King's 16,000 acres into a highly developed ski resort, irate environmentalists launched a 13-year siege of suits that in turn launched countersuits, environmental impact reports, and Supreme Court rulings, a legal battle nearly as impressive as the landscape being battled over.

The battle may not be over yet: though Mineral King became part of Sequoia National Park in 1978 and though a new draft management plan calls for its 16,000 acres to be kept as little developed as possible, Fresno Congressman Charles Pashayan recently introduced a bill mandating the construction of a ski resort in the area.

But for the time being Mineral King seems likely to be what it has been for most of this century: a quiet place of meadows and mountains and chaste lakes, a place for a relatively small number of determined visitors (developed campsites can hold only 55 groups per night; trails starting at 7,000 feet will try almost anyone's lungs and legs). Those who come will be rewarded with large amounts of beauty. If you are such a visitor, the area is at its most hospitable now.



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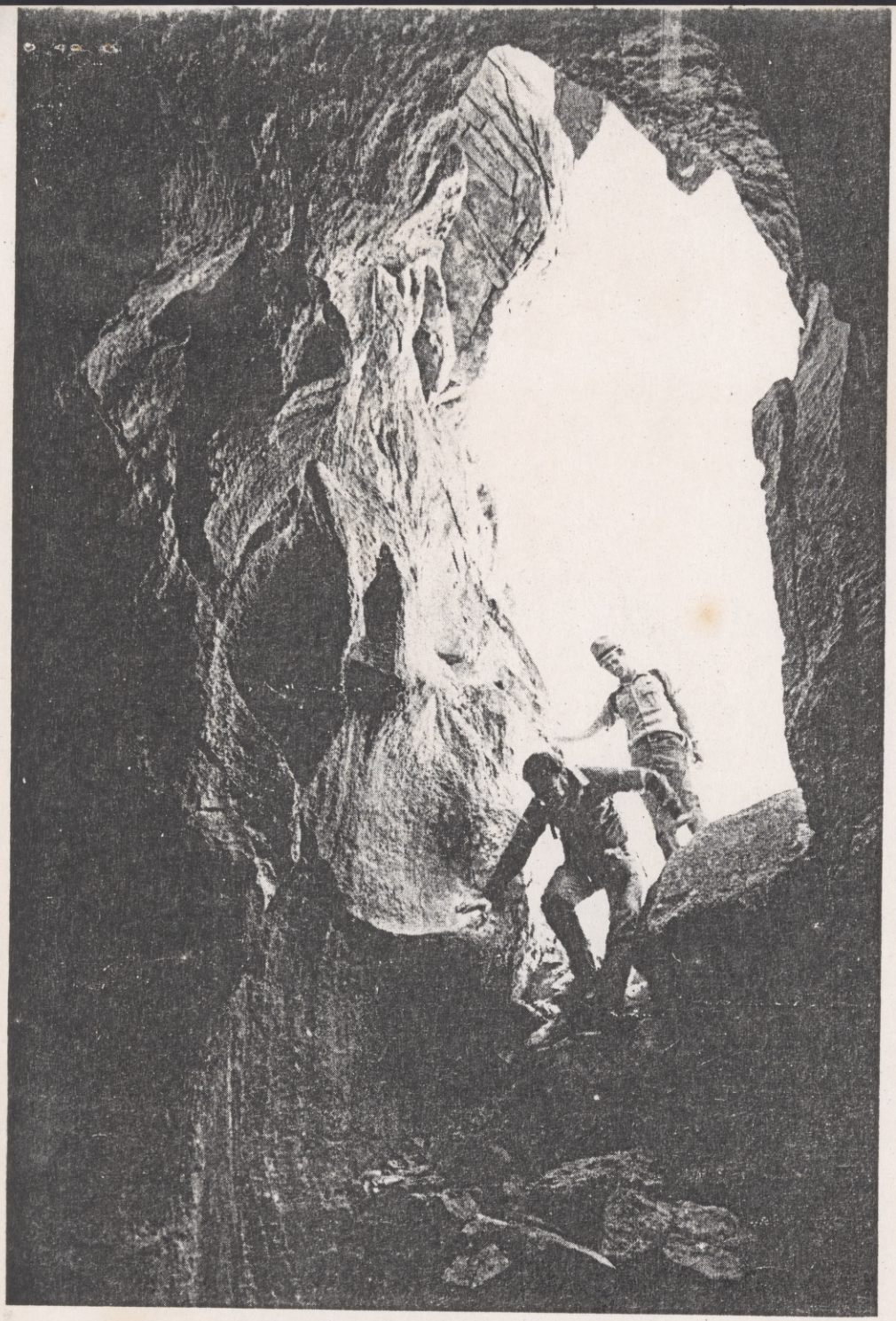

BILL ROSS

Chiaroscuro cavern *is one of several found on trail to White Chief Lake*

Metamorphic morsel *is searched for silver; mining once lured 3,000 people here*

Campfire talks *are one benefit of Mineral King's entry into Sequoia National Park*

First, of course, you have to get there. Most people come by way of State Highway 99, branching off at Visalia and taking State 198 30 miles to Three Rivers. From there it's a 2-hour drive east on 26-mile-long Mineral King Road.

Under the original resort proposal, the road would have been widened; now, except for some judicious paving, it will remain much as it was in the early part of the century, when Model Ts were forced to drive it in reverse because their forward gears weren't up to the climb. For today's passenger cars (RVs are not recommended), the road remains steep enough to test radiators going up and brakes going down and curvy enough to test back-seat stomachs in both directions. It compensates for these flaws by being precipitously pretty.

Rather not make the drive yourself? Catch a ride on one of the High Sierra Stage's 14-passenger vans. One leaves Visalia for Mineral King Sundays at 10 A.M., Fridays at 1:30 P.M.; it leaves Mineral King Sundays at 2 P.M., Fridays at 5:30. Through the Sierra Stage you can make connections with Inland Empire Airlines, which serves Visalia from Los Angeles and San Francisco, with Greyhound and Trailways, and with Amtrak in nearby Hanford. Round-trip fare is $19.25 (add $5 for Hanford). Write or call High Sierra Stage, The Rucksack, 1043 S. Mooney Blvd., Visalia, Calif. 93277; (209) 732-4404.

Along Mineral King Road's upper end you'll find the area's two developed campgrounds. The first, 23-site Atwell Mill, lies 4 miles west of Mineral King Valley, within easy hiking of two impressive stands of sequoia: the Atwell Mill Grove, directly north, and the East Fork Grove, across the East Fork of the Kahweah to the south. The second, 32-site Cold Springs, lies just beyond the western fringes of the valley.

Both see heavy use on summer weekends; to sidestep crowds, plan a weekday or post-Labor Day visit. (Weather usually remains amiable through September.) For campsite availability, call the Sierra District Office, Sequoia National Park, (209) 565-3341.

Another overnight alternative is the set of cabins ($22 to $32) at Silver City; write to Silver City Store and Cabins, Three Rivers, Calif. 93271, or call (209) Silver City Toll Station #2 (via Fresno

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BILL ROSS

You round 700 curves *(by one estimate) before arriving at Mineral King; van service lets you leave steering to others*

operator). Next to the cabins is a small store and restaurant, open 6:30 A.M. to 7:30 P.M. daily through summer.

Easy introduction to the valley

Through mid-September, interpretive walks leave daily from Mineral King Ranger Station (check there for walk times and campfire programs). A guided introduction is helpful because things are not always what they seem. This time of year Mineral King Valley looks appealingly, everlastingly tame, a 3-mile-long subalpine meadow so green it appears to be waiting for Heidi to skip across it.

In fact, August's peace is purchased by January's mayhem. Lying below 8,000 feet, the valley should by rights be forested; that it's not is the result of the avalanches that lunge off the mountainsides most winters. You can see further evidence of these slides on the cleared rock chutes above the valley floor.

Snow has also removed most evidence of the valley's human settlement, at one time considerable. As its name proclaims, Mineral King was once thought to be a veritable discount house of precious metals, and in the mining boom in the late 1870s, 3,000 people and 600 buildings crowded the valley floor.

But boom turned bust the following decade, logging rose and fell with equal speed, and although the traces of these activities were enough to keep Mineral King outside Sequoia National Park when the park expanded in 1926, today all that remains are scattered cabins, the occasional shred of machinery, and some mine shafts. (Ranger-led trips sometimes explore their entrances and those of the marble caves found along some trails. Don't poke too far in on your own.)

Day and longer hikes to glacial lakes and beyond

Trails rise from the valley into the surrounding mountains. All are steep and the altitude makes them seem steeper, but the views and the trailside gentians and phlox make rest stops pleasant.

The most popular destinations for backpackers and ambitious day hikers are the lakes found above the valley, all of them formed in the lower reaches of glacial-carved cirques. They include Eagle Lake, a 4-mile walk from Mineral King Ranger Station on Eagle Lake Trail; Mosquito Lakes, a 5-mile hike (to the lowest of the five lakes) via the Eagle Lake and Mosquito Lakes trails; Franklin Lake (6 miles), reached by taking the Farewall Canyon Trail south to the Franklin Pass Trail, which climbs east to the lower of the two Franklin Lakes; White Chief Lake (6 miles), reached by taking the Eagle-Mosquito Lakes Trail, then cutting to the south on White Chief Trail, which disappears in talus before it reaches the lake; and Monarch Lake (6 miles), reached by taking the Sawtooth Pass Trail towards Sawtooth Pass, then turning south to Monarch Lake.

In addition, Mineral King has long been a popular jumping-off point for longer trips into the wilderness: over Timber Gap to more northerly portions of Sequoia National Park; over Sawtooth Pass and Franklin Pass across the Great Western Divide; and over Farewell Gap into the Golden Trout Wilderness.

Essential to planning such trips is the USGS Mineral King topographic map; very helpful are *High Sierra Hiking Guide #8, Mineral King,* by Ron Felzer (Wilderness Press, Berkeley, 1981; $4.95) and *Self-Propelled in the Southern Sierra, Volume 2,* by J. C. Jenkins (Wilderness Press, 1979; $8.95).

Back-country permits, burros, horses

Such are the pressures on the Sierra these days that the Park Service has had to sharply restrict camping outside of developed campsites. Permits are required, and daily limits have been placed on the number of people allowed to begin hikes on each trail. Half the openings can be filled by reserving through Sierra District Office, Sequoia National Park, Three Rivers, Calif. 93271; (209) 565-3306. The other half are filled on a first-come basis at Mineral King Ranger Station.

Within Mineral King, open fires are prohibited above 9,000 feet; as this takes in many places people hike to, bring a stove and be prepared to backpack out all trash.

If you'd like some four-footed aid, try taking one of the burro- or horse-packing trips offered by the Mineral King Pack Station. Prices range from $20 to $55 per person per day; day rides are $28. Write to the pack station, Box 61, Three Rivers, Calif. 93271; or call (209) 561-4142 or (209) Mineral King Toll Station #4. □

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